

The Redeemer Mary & You

UNDERSTANDING THE ICON OF
OUR MOTHER OF PERPETUAL HELP

The Best of Bro. Dan



In my book *Embracing the Icon of Love*, I explain the practice of reading and praying the iconography contained in this holy image. Saint Alphonsus Liguori (1707-1787) inspired in the Redemptorists a great love for Mary and wrote several books on Marian devotion. In *The Glories of Mary*, his reflections offer useful meditations about Mary's place in the mystery of Christ and the Church. In *Visits to the Most Blessed Sacrament and the Blessed Virgin Mary*, he writes: "Whoever works to honor me, says Mary, will persevere. Those who explain me to others will have eternal life. Promise, then, to speak whenever you can, whether in public or in private, of the glories of Mary and of devotion to her." If you want to develop a deeper devotion for the Mother of God, these books can help guide you.

Reading of and praying with iconography inspires Redemptorists, and it is new for us to use the icon in our evangelization efforts to promote devotion to our Lady under the title of Our Mother of Perpetual Help. Join us, and receive the grace of Mary's protection and love along with a great love for Jesus Christ and his gospel.

—Bro. Dan Korn, C.Ss.R.



Holy Gazing

Visio Divina, a term used in the practice of contemplative prayer, means “holy gazing.” This refers to the practice of looking into something with intention and purpose, focusing on a certain object. In our case, the “something” is the icon of Our Mother of Perpetual Help.

You may be familiar with Lectio Divina, the ancient form of praying the Scriptures. We select a Scripture passage and read it several times. Then after picking a word or phrase that stands out to us, we close our eyes and enter into quietude and silence with the word of God. It is a form of meditation. We leave behind our distractions and allow the Scripture to speak to us in the silence of our inner self.

In Lectio Divina we use our sense of active listening to lead us into contemplation. Visio Divina is similar, except we use our sense of sight to lead us into contemplation. In Visio Divina, we look, reflect, pray, and ponder on one of the elements of the icon before us. We allow ourselves to simply rest in a quiet silence as we gaze on a particular element—we close our eyes and remain in a space of silent prayer.

When distractions enter our prayer space, we gently acknowledge them, then let them go. Visio Divina should not be approached with a sense of anxiety. It is as simple as being present within the icon we see before us using our sense of sight.

WE EXPERIENCE THE POWERFUL ENERGY OF AN ICON THROUGH OUR EYES. LOOKING INTO A HOLY ICON, WE EXPERIENCE THE HOLY LOOKING BACK AT US.



The Holy Center of the Icon

A Portal Into Mystery

*For this reason, when he came into the world, he said:
“Sacrifice and offering you did not desire,
but a body you prepared for me;
holocausts and sin offerings you took no delight in.
Then I said, ‘As is written of me in the scroll,
Behold, I come to do your will, O God.’”*

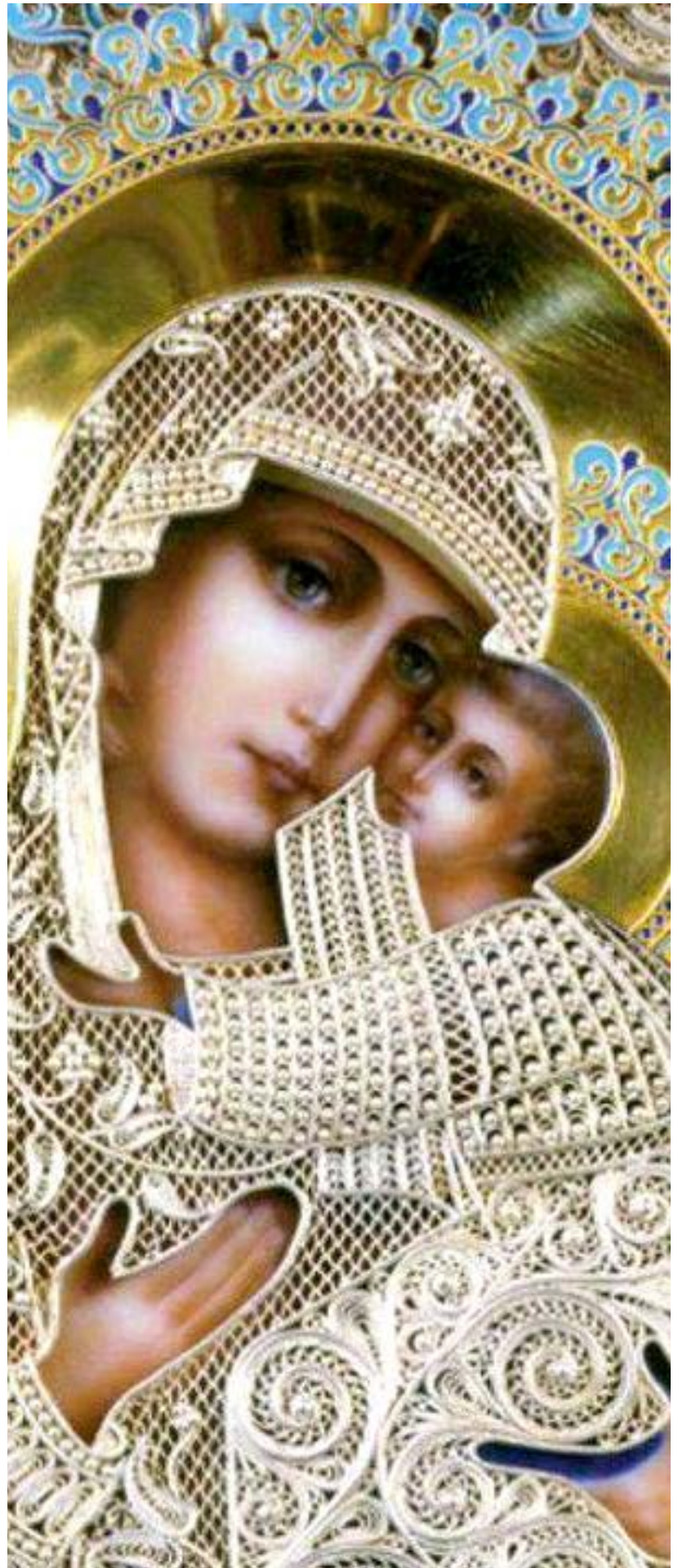
—Hebrews 10:5-7

The common and best-known definition of icons is, “they are windows into mystery.” In short, the result of reading and praying icons is a spiritual experience. In the icon of Our Mother of Perpetual Help, the “window” is plentiful redemption. Where is the entrance point for us to enter into the heart of the icon of Our Mother of Perpetual Help? In other words, where is the door that opens to the powerful experience of the mystery of Mary?

In the long-form name of the icon, the Miraculous Our Mother of Perpetual Help, the word miraculous is a key to experiencing the center of the icon. In the geometric center of the icon, the child Logos holds Mary’s right thumb between his hands. This is a sacred space filled with wonder and glory. It is highly symbolic of the great mystery of the Incarnation and the statement of the importance of Mary in the mystery of our salvation.

The way the hands of the child lay over the thumb joint of the hand of Mary represents his human and divine nature. The left hand of the Christ Child, fully formed and facing outward, represents his human nature. His right hand is somewhat hidden; this partial exposure represents his divinity hidden in his humanity. This intimate expression of the hands over the center of Mary (her heart), is an expression of the love of the Logos Child for his Mother, from whom he has taken his human form.

When we pray with the icon we can center our prayer of gazing on these hands with readings from Hebrews 10:5-7.



The Icon: The School of Mary

As we read and pray the icon, we come under the influence of Mary as a teacher and an evangelist.

This understanding is somewhat new. We aren't accustomed to understand devotion to our Lady as having a dimension other than our selected novenas and prayers. However, icons are not just static objects of sacred imagery, they're energy-filled realities that draw us into a relationship with what or who the image represents.

As we pray before the icon of Our Mother of Perpetual Help, we experience a presence, sometimes described as consolation or a feeling of great peace. Through her penetrating look, Mary invites us into a sacred space of contemplation.

In this holy space we become spiritually sensitive. Our prayer before the icon becomes a catechesis on the mystery of Redemption.

Looking upon her in this way, we are reminded of a person who desires to share with us a message of urgent concern. Through this movement of grace, we enter into the heart of what an icon is: a meeting place between the beholder and the image represented. We are invited to pass through the external form of the icon into the space of divine mystery. This is why icons are referred to as windows into mystery. The icon of Our Mother of Perpetual Help is an experience, an invitation to embrace redemptive love.

In our prayer of gazing before the icon, we imitate Mary in her response to the message of the angel at the annunciation. In the Gospel of St. Luke (1:35), we find: "The angel said to [Mary], **"The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. Therefore the child to be born will be called holy, the Son of God."**

This Scripture passage captures the symbolic meaning of Mary's eyes, ears, and mouth in the Icon. Mary also gives attention to the angel. As we read the passage we notice Mary's ear is turned toward us; her small mouth symbolizes her silence before the mystery of God as announced by the angel.

Indeed, gazing at the icon with Scripture is a type of Marian "school." The exchange of holy energy in our prayer before the icon is deepened with much grace when we add Scripture readings to our devotion.

May we continue to give serious attention to the workings of God in our lives by intentionally listening to the many ways the Holy Spirit speaks to us in our devotion to Our Mother of Perpetual Help.

The background gold

The eight-pointed star

The eyes of the Virgin

Archangels Michael & Gabriel

The gaze of the child

The hands of Mary

The feet of the child logos



Mary
Invites Us Into
a Space of
Contemplation



We aren't accustomed to understand devotion to our Lady as having a dimension other than our selected novenas and prayers. However, as we've reflected on previously in this column, icons are not static objects of sacred imagery that remind us of the holy. Rather, they're energy-filled realities that draw us into a relationship with what or who the image represents.

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We can give greater devotion to Our Mother of Perpetual Help by devoting time to gaze into the mystery of the icon and spiritually absorb Mary's influence as an evangelist.

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The Prayer of Gazing



We don't create our lives. We are called to our lives. The important answers are found not in thought or business, but through quiet contemplation of God the spirit of which we then bring to our daily lives. God has put us in a specific place, with specific problems and needs. Our job is to learn through His guidance what we ourselves and the world around us need to be made whole.

The angels are lost in perpetual contemplation of an infinite glory.

Below are detailed a series of stages that can help us prepare for the prayer of gazing with the icon. We encourage you to set aside about 20 minutes each day to repeat these steps before the icon of Our Mother of Perpetual Help.

THE PRACTICE:

1. Find a quiet place in your home where you can hang or view a picture of the Icon of Our Mother of Perpetual Help. If space allows, you might create a small shrine to her that you can sit or kneel before. It's most important that the space be quiet, allowing you to relax and be present with the Icon.
2. Take a moment to become still. Be attentive to your breathing. Breathe God in and out.
3. If you have preceded this period of contemplation with a scripture reading or meditation, be attentive to what you are feeling as a result of the reading and reflection. You might want to express your thoughts and feelings privately to God before proceeding.
4. Now release your thoughts to God so that you are no longer actively engaged with them. As thoughts pass through your mind try not to dwell on or entertain them, but allow them space to float free of your mind.
5. Make sure the icon is at eye level. If you have a Bible, you might open it to the Gospel of Luke. Gently place your hands on the written word and slowly allow your eyes to gaze on the icon.
6. Simply gaze with soft eyes on the Icon. Perhaps your attention will be drawn to Mary's eyes or her hands. Allow this process to unfold with soft attention. To gaze is to fix attention, but in a relaxed manner. In a sense you are "relaxing" into the picture, or perhaps allowing the picture into your heart. Allow God into your heart through the Icon. You do not need to direct or be active in your attention.
7. You might also or instead choose to close your eyes and become aware of your breathing. As distractions come into your mind, gently acknowledge them and let them go. Become aware of your desire to be with God at this moment. Ask God to help you let go of whatever may distance you from God's closeness. Rest in this silence, letting distractions fade away. Thoughts will enter your mind, but do not entertain them. If a particular thought persists, or you find your mind wandering, open your eyes and gently bring your attention back to the Icon. You might also reach out to Mary and Christ with a simple word such as "love" or "God." Close your eyes again and let the silence again surround you.
8. After a period of time, open your eyes, or if you chose to keep your eyes open, slowly bring your gaze back into focus and attention. You might feel on this day or future days that you have had a wonderful experience, or conversely, that you felt absolutely nothing and your heart was closed. Whatever your experience, be merciful to yourself. You can easily fall into the judgment that you are "succeeding" or "failing" to pray properly. However, the prayer of gazing is not about doing it right or successfully. It is only our willingness to dedicate this time to God that is important. God and Our Mother of Perpetual Help will take care of the rest! Now end your prayer session by saying the Hail Mary slowly while keeping your gaze focused on the Icon.



Coinciding with the restoration of the Icon of Our Mother of Perpetual Help in the early 1990s has been a renewed interest in devotions to Our Mother. A prominent aspect of this renewal has been the growing attraction to traditional forms of prayer and devotion associated with icons. The Redemptorists are at the forefront of this revival, instructing congregations worldwide in such devotions, including through what has been called the prayer of gazing.

This booklet is a compilation of articles from Brother Dan Korn's column "The Redeemer, Mary and You" that appear regularly in the Redemptorists' Liguorian magazine. For the past 20 years Brother Korn has preached missions on the Icon throughout North America. In 2015, in an effort to make these teachings available to a wider audience, Brother Korn published Embracing the Icon of Love. The course is in particular an elaboration on Part Three of Brother Korn's book in which he discusses various prayers and exercises including the prayer of gazing.

